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THE CHANGED AND CHANGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION.

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TODAY, ONLY 1 OUT OF EVERY 8 PEOPLE IS A FARM DWELLER, AND THIS RATIO DECREASES BY 4 PERCENT ANNUALLY. AS A RESULT, THE STUDENT DISTRIBUTION HAS BECOME EXTREMELY SKEWED IN THE DIRECTION OF THE URBAN SCHOOL, WHILE RURAL SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN FORCED TO CURTAIL NEEDED SERVICES. CONSEQUENTLY, THE RURAL STUDENT LAGS ABOUT 2 YEARS BEHIND THE URBAN STUDENT IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT. RURAL FAMILIES OF TODAY, ALTHOUGH LESS NUMEROUS, HAVE APPROACHED THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STANDARDS OF URBAN FAMILIES. SEVERAL PATTERNS APPEAR TO BE EMERGING IN VARIOUS ASPECTS OF RURAL LIFE. THREE OCCUPATIONAL CLUSTERS ARE IN EVIDENCE TODAY--(1) THE BUSINESS-LIKE FARMER WHO APPROACHES FARMING AS AN INDUSTRY, (2) THE LOW INCOME FARMER WHO IS FOUND ON THE POORER LAND AND WHO IS MOST IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE, AND (3) THE PEOPLE WHO WORK IN THE CITY AND SIMPLY LIVE IN RURAL AREAS, WHO APPROACH AGRICULTURE FROM A STRICTLY AVOCATIONAL STANDPOINT. THE TRADE CENTER COMMUNITY HAS REPLACED THE STEREOTYPED RURAL NEIGHBORHOOD. ANOTHER EMERGENT PATTERN HAS BEEN WITH RESPECT TO RURAL PERSONALITY. TRADITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENCE, SELF-RELIANCE, AND THE CONVICTION OF THE SECONDARY ROLE OF EDUCATION HAVE BEEN DISPLACED BY THE STRONG MOTIVATION TO GAIN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POSITION. THIS SPEECH WAS DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RURAL EDUCATION, NEA LOUISVILLE, OCTOBER 7-8, 1960). (DA)

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Louisville, Kentucky
Oct. 7-8, 1960

SPEAKER: Alvin L. Bertrand, Professor, Department of Sociology and Rural Sociology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

TOPIC: The Changed and Changing Socio-Economic Situation

PLACE: Grand Ballroom, Sheraton Hotel

It is a great honor for me to appear before you this morning and also a great opportunity. As a rural sociologist, I am continually on the alert for additional insight into human relationships and behavior in the rural environment. I expect to be considerably enriched with regards to educational matters after this conference.

My specific assignment was to review for you the recent major socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in rural America. This topic is one of great professional and personal interest to me. The attempt to keep abreast of rural social change in our country is a most exciting intellectual adventure.

By way of introduction I should like to make the following observations. First, it would be naive for me to presume that what I am going to say will be entirely new to you. Rural educators, of all people, are aware of the many changes which are taking place in rural life. It is a matter of record that you have been directly responsible for some of these changes. Second, the nature of this presentation is such that I will have to speak in generalities and omit detailed references for the most part.1/ Summary approaches, of course, tend to conceal the wide variation which exists between regions and within regions. They do suffice to indicate national trends and to show the nature of change and this will be my purpose. Thirdly, no attempt will be made to assign causal factors to given items of change. In this regard, the nature of change agents will be obvious in certain instances, although our attention will be focussed on the end results. Finally, the term rural will be used in its broad conventional sense to include all peoples living outside of urban places. Persons living in population centers having less than 2500 inhabitants, on the fringe of larger urban centers and in open country residences but not on a farm, will be designated as rural non-farm. The term rural farm or farm will be used to identify the persons who are tied to the soil in an occupational way. The latter will be frequently singled out for specific attention.

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1/ Although no references to specific sources are made, the information presented is principally from the various U. S. Census publications and the research reports of the various State Agricultural Experiment Stations and of the U, S. Department of Agriculture.

My presentation is organized roughly under four major headings. In the first section I propose to review the changes of a demographic nature which have or are taking place in our nation. Secondly, I will go into the changes of a primarily socio-economic nature, listing and describing them to the best of my ability. Next, the other socio-cultural changes and the socio-psychological changes which can be identified will be reviewed. Finally, some emerging panoramas of rural social life will be described.

The Changed and Changing Demographic Situation

Rural population changes and trends can be divided into two broad categories: Those which relate to the number and the distribution of the population, and those which relate to the composition of the population. Insofar as numbers are concerned, it is well known that the population of the United States has been increasing rapidly within the past few years. There are close to 180 million people in the United States today and it is estimated that this number will increase another 25 per cent by 1975. In the light of this fact, it is paradoxical that the number of farm people in the nation has been declining steadily. As a matter of fact, we have shifted from a rural to an urban society in less than a century and a half. In 1790, only 5.1 per cent of the American people were classified as urban. By 1920, urban dwellers outnumbered rural dwellers in the U. S. Today, approximately two-thirds of the nation's inhabitants live in metropolitan areas.

In contrast, as late as 1910, one out of every three persons lived on a farm. Today reliable reports indicate that only every eighth person resides on a farm.

At the same time the farm population is decreasing, the rural non-farm population is increasing. This population has approximately doubled itself in the last decade, jumping 48 per cent between 1950 and 1958. Much of this increase has occurred in the urban fringe of the larger cities.

The changes in the distribution of the farm population among the geographic divisions of the U. S. are of interest. Although the South continues to have approximately half of the farm population of the country, the proportion of farm people in the South has been falling since 1940. This region experienced a decline in its farm population between 1950 and 1958 of 21 per cent, as compared with 13 per cent in the rest of the nation. Above average declines in the rural population also occurred in the Great Plains and Mountain States areas. At the present time the North Central States include about one-third and the Northeast states and Western states each have slightly less than one-tenth of the farm population of the United States.

The above shifts in population are closely related to rural-urban migration patterns. It is not generally appreciated that a net of over 7 million persons left U. S. farms between 1950 and 1958 and that over 4 per cent of the farm population pulls out for urban centers or other non-farm residences every year.

It is of interest to note briefly the implication which these migration trends have for our rural schools. Without elaboration, it can be said that many areas face serious problems of keeping their schools going as the people move out. Other places, including most population centers and the areas near population centers, may be hard pressed to take care of the influx of children to educate.

Changes in the composition of the rural population do not appear to be as drastic as changes in its numbers and distribution. There continues to be a marked scarcity of young people and an over abundance of aged and pre-school and school children in the farm areas of the United States. Significantly, people in their prime of life now comprise only one-third of the farm population while those in the dependent ages of 55 years or over and less than 18 years, make up two-thirds of this population.

Education is one of the component characteristics of a group and is probably the best measure of the quality of a population which we have. Our rural population has shown a steady rise in degree of education attainment, but it continues to lag behind the other residential components of the population. The median level of educational attainment of rural farm adults 25 years and older, as determined by a recent census survey, was 8.6 years, some two years less than that for the total population. Among persons in the age range 35-44 years, the respective educational attainment was 9.2 years and 12.0 years. This shows the gains made in the last 10 years.

There has been a steady upward trend in the age of farmers since the turn of the century. The median age of farm operators was estimated as less than 40 years in 1910. By 1940 as many farmers were over 48 as were under this age. Today (1956) the median age for farmers is 51 years and 20 per cent of our farm operators are over 65 years old. By contrast the heads of all households, rural and urban, in the United States have a median age of 46 years.

The number and percentages of Negroes in the rural population is also decreasing and this is another change affecting the composition of the population. This is principally a phenomenon of the southern region, as it is here the rural Negro was and is found in largest number. Detailed data are not available, but evidence of this fact can be found throughout the region.

The Changed and Changing Socio-Economic Situation

A study of socio-economic changes in rural life is important for two reasons: In the first place, the farmer's struggle for existence is essentially carried on within the framework of economic activity. In the second place, economic institutions are the fastest to respond to stimuli of change. New technology or other factors relating to production and distribution are able to promote change by introducing a bias into the competitive process.

Agriculture can be said to be in the middle of significant changes which relate specifically to the structure of farming. One of the most striking trends is the increase in the proportion of owners and part-owners and decrease in the proportion of tenants and farm laborers. Twenty-five years ago social scientists were worrying about high rates of tenancy and were concerned over how the acquisition of land ownership might be encourage. Today this is no problem. Significantly the laborers who do remain on today's farms are more skilled, more educated, more likely to be specialists, and better paid than the laborers of the past.

In the last two decades, the total acreage of land used for growing crops has changed very little, but there has been a steady decrease in the number of farms. From 1940 to 1954 the number of farms in the U. S. dropped by 1,300,000. Since 1954, it is estimated that there was a decrease of still another 500,000 farms. The number of farms in operation in 1958 (4 3/4 millions) was exactly 18 per cent below the number 10 years ago.

At the same time that the number of farms have been decreasing, the size of farms has been increasing. In 1910, the average U. S. farm included only 138 acres. Currently, the average size farm is around 270 acres. It is interesting to note the larger farms are getting larger at the expense of the smaller farms. The average size of the farms of 1000 acres or more increased from 3,662 acres in 1940 to 4,073 acres in 1954. At the same time the number of such farms increased by 30 per cent.

Farms are also becoming more specialized. This may be illustrated as follows. The number of farms producing dairy products for sale declined by one million from 1940-54. However, the total production of dairy products increased. The change in the broiler industry shows this trend even more drastically. The number of farms reporting chickens and broilers declined by one-third between 1949 and 1954, but sales of the remaining farms almost doubled.

Another change in the structure of farms has been in the amount of production capital used. Between 1950 and 1958 this figure almost doubled, jumping from $17,000 to $33,500 per farm. The investment per farm worker jumped 115 per cent in the same period, from $9,600 to $20,000. The investment in farm machinery and motor vehicles is now six times what it was in 1940.

Farm land values have also increased tremendously, rising 63 per cent from 1950-1958. The most important reasons for this particular change appears to be the attitudes of people toward farm land as an investment. This attitude, coupled with the fact that farm operators are continually trying to increase their holdings for greater profits, serves to increase the price of farm land almost everywhere.

Another important socio-economic change is the dramatic growth of non-farm inputs in the agricultural production process. Large scales industries have mushroomed to furnish the new marketing and processing services which agriculture now demands. These inputs, including such things as machinery, fertilizer, pesticides, feed additives, packaging materials, storage facilities, and gasoline, now measure up to more than half the inputs used in agricultural production.

At this point, an important type of economic adjustment taking place in farm areas needs to be mentioned. This is what is known as vertical integration. A farmer whose operations are vertically integrated shares the management function and risk bearing with one or more related businesses. For example, in the broiler industry, it is common for the farmer to provide a broiler house, equipment and labor and for a feed dealer or other non-farmer to supply chicks, feed, medicine, fuel, and litter. It has been said that vertical integration, including all types of contract farming, is one of the most potent forces in our agriculture today. Among the changes vertical integration is helping bring about are: (1) increases in the size of individual enterprises so that labor-saving equipment can be used and all resources fully utilized (2) specialization in order to attain lowest costs per units of input (3) speeded up adoption of new technology (4) changes in the leadership role of farmer (5) alterations in marketing procedures and channels.

The speed with which technological changes have come to American agriculture may be seen in the increased productivity of farm workers. Today's average farmer produces as much in one hour as he did in two hours in 1940. In 1900 one farm worker produced only enough for himself and 6.9 others. Today he produces enough for himself and 25 others.

From the above it may be gathered that socio-economic changes are such as to effect great changes in the capital requirements for farming. This has triggered still another change which is significant for rural life. It is now almost impossible for most young persons to raise the necessary capital to go into farming. At present, only about one-third of the boys born on farms remain there. The future may very well see our well known family farm system pass out of the picture.

Changes in levels of living are socio-economic in nature and may be reviewed briefly. Farm families now approach urban families in the equipment and facilities for family living which they possess or use. According to a national survey made in 1956, almost all farm families in the nation now have electricity and mechanical refrigeration and 3/4 of them own automobiles. This same survey showed that close to 2/3 of our farmers have their homes equipped with running water and half of them have telephones. A recent study determined that 73 per cent of all farm homes are equipped with T. V. sets. The incredible rate of change in this instance may be seen when it is known that only three per cent of these homes had television in 1950. Farm incomes have improved on the average within recent years but are still considerably lower than non-farm incomes. In 1958, the total cash income per person on farms from farming alone was $768; from all sources, farm and non-farm, $1,066.

The changing socio-economic picture may also be seen in the trend toward rural industrialization. Within the past few years there has been a tremendous effort on the part of certain government agencies and some rural communities to bring industries to the rural areas of the nation. It is not unusual today to see factories in small villages or in the open country. These industries have not always proved an unmixed blessing, but they have served to bring change--not only in levels of living but in ways of life. One important development related to this phenomenon is the part-time farmer who holds an outside job. According to the 1954 census there were nearly 1.5 million so-called part-time farms in the nation.

Other Aspects of the Changed and Changing Socio-Cultural Situation

Many changes besides the ones mentioned above are taking place in rural America. These changes are evidenced primarily in social organization and social participation. They tend to center in the other major areas of institutional behavior besides the economic, although all are interrelated to some extent.

Changes in the rural family: The rural family today is a far cry from the pioneer family or even the early 20th Century rural family in the United States. It no longer performs as many functions or is as close knit a unit. The most significant trend is for women to shed domestic roles in favor of outside occupational careers of one kind or another. There is a tremendous increase in the number of women, especially married women over 35, who are holding jobs outside the home. In April of 1957 there were three million farm resident people working principally at non-farm work and one million of these were women. Over one-fourth of the farm wives of the nation are now working outside the home.

As rural women have become "emancipated" other changes in family organization and functioning occur. The traditional patriarchal structure, where the father was the seat of authority, tends to break down and women and older children participate with more equality in the decision-making process.

Current trends indicate both that rural families are getting smaller and urban families larger, although rural birth rates continue higher than urban birth rates. The rural family is not as stable as it once was although it is still considerably more so than the urban family.

Family life has also been affected by the shortened work week on the farm. A recent nationwide survey indicated that the average work day of farm operators in the U. S. is about ten hours in the winter and twelve hours in the summer. This is considerably shorter than the 16 to 18 hour days that farmers put in a generation ago. The work rhythm has also changed in farm areas. Instead of a steady five or six day week with Sundays off, there is a tendency toward shift work with different members of the family taking different days of the week off. This leads to other patterns such as different family members belonging to different organizations and groups. The rural family now is not as much of a self contained unit as in years past. More and more it goes outside itself for services such as the care of its aged and recreation. All of these changes tend to complicate family planning, reduce its solidarity, and increase the complexity of family organization.

Changes in Rural Education: Changes in rural education are so familiar to this group that it would be presumptuous to go into detail. Suffice it to say that the major trends have resulted in an increasingly higher level of education for our rural youngsters. Several changes have come about in the effort to improve rural education and because of the declining farm population. The most noticeable has been the consolidation of school districts. As you know, between 1947 and 1957 the number of school districts in the nation was reduced roughly by half, from 104,074 to 50,403. Other changes are evidenced by changing curriculas to better meet the needs of rural youngsters, the increasing number of better qualified teachers and the improved facilities and buildings of rural schools generally. Teachers pay has also risen, although it still lags behind the pay of urban teachers in most places.

Insofar as informal education is concerned, rural people are approaching urban patterns in the use of mass media. Almost all farm families have radios and, as mentioned, about three-fourths of them have T. V. sets. Daily newspapers and other periodicals are also reaching rural people in ever increasing numbers. Despite these changes, a discrepancy in educational attainment remains. The average adult ruralite has an educational attainment of about 8 grades whereas the average city adult has completed something more than 10 grades of school.

Changes in Rural Government and Politics: Government and politics have traditionally been slow to change in rural areas. Nevertheless, there is evidence that changes of this nature are underway. Some examples of such changes may be cited.

1. The ever-increasing demand for good roads, drainage projects, etc. has tended to shift political control from local communities to centralized state or federal sources.

2. Increasing technology, such as the use of toxic sprays, have made it necessary for legal authorities to define and enforce an ever increasing number of rules of conduct.

3. Programs of inspection, quarantine, standardization and sanitation are increasing with time.

4. Farmers are becoming more and more involved with programs of subsidy, price support, loans, and relief each year.

5. Rural groups are experiencing a diminishing role in political decision-making. This is an important change which escapes many observers. However, it is understandable in the light of the decreasing number of farm votes.

6. Finally, there is indication that rural local government is slowly moving from its traditional autonomous and familistic nature. With increasing education and as more attention is paid to training law enforcement officers and other local officials, there is less "lay" interpretation of the law. In this regard, it is also quite evident that rural political campaigns are losing their recreational flavor. The television and radio are replacing the barbecue and the picnic as a means of garnering votes.

Changes in Rural Religion: Religion has been, from the beginning of this country, one of the major social forces in rural areas. The church continues to be the organization most popular among rural persons, although recent trends indicate some changes are taking place. In areas where population declines are in evidence, the church is declining. Sometimes what is known as overchurching develops--a situation where there are not enough members to adequately support a program. At other times the church buildings are literally abandoned. In places characterized by commercial or part-time farming, the rural church appears to be increasing in vigor and becoming more sophisticated. Here, better trained religious leaders and improved programs are in evidence.

One change involving the religious complex of rural life is apparent to the close observer. This is the gradual shift of some sects and denominations into and others out of rural areas. Some of the older church bodies seem to be losing their relative strength in the lower income farm areas for one reason or another.

Changes in Rural Health: Rural health conditions have improved tremendously in the last 25 years or so. There is less unmet health care need, less practice of folk remedies, and less consumption of patent medicines. Several important reasons account for the gains in rural health. Among these are: (1) the increasingly widespread use of medical prepayment plans and health insurance, (2) the building of hospitals under government subsidy and other programs, and (3) the awakening of rural communities to good health practices through educational programs.

Welfare activities also have a new look in rural areas. Traditionally, farm groups have been more inclined to assume responsibility for their aged and needy than urban peoples. However, as needs have increased, local and state governments are being called upon increasingly to aid rural welfare cases. The Social Security Program, opened to farmers in 1954, is also enlisting a growing number of rural clients. One may speculate regarding the ultimate effect of a retirement program for farmers. Previously, most of this group literally died behind the plow. It may be seen that health and welfare changes have done much to change the functioning of the rural family.

The Emerging Panoramas of American Rural Life

Until now, only specific items of changes have been listed. Obviously each individual item is but one thread in a whole fabric of change. In contemplating the total picture, I visualize three broad panoramas of rural change unfolding on the American scene. The first centers in the changing occupational structure of rural life, the second is centered on the changing rural community and the third is centered on the changing rural personality. The person who can form a composite picture of these three panoramas in his mind will have the best summary portrayal of rural life today possible. Each panorama may be described briefly as follows:

The Emerging Occupational Groups in Rural Areas: At least three major rural groups may be distinguished in emergent form on the basis of their work and way of life characteristics. First, it is possible to detect a business-like, highly efficient commercial farmer type. In some places, these individuals are on large family-sized farms, in others they are connected with large-scale operations comparable to that found in industrial production enterprises. They are generally to be found in the best land areas. The term "factories in the fields" has been used to describe their activities. Members of this group fit the stereotype of farmers of the past in few if any ways. To them agriculture is a business venture comparable to other business ventures and is not construed as a way of life as well. Operations and decisions are impersonal and there is little time for sentiment. Modern techniques are used to cut costs and raise profits and close attention is paid to market factors. The characteristics and the behavior of the commercial farmer are more like those of business and industrial persons in urban centers than other rural groups.

The second rural group which may be recognized on the basis of work and life activities includes a large number of average or low income farmers. They are found on the poorer soils and in the less desirable locations and usually have relatively small holdings. Some of this group are barely eking out a living, while others have taken work in nearby industries and are able to maintain themselves at a higher level. A considerable number in this group are retired individuals who live on the land because of certain ties or because they value living "in the country" highly. The latter plant and harvest as a sideline at most. Although this farm group is a marginal one in some ways, the way of life which is followed comes closest to traditional rural life patterns in this country. They cherish and uphold many values which have long been associated with the "American way of life."

The third emergent occupational group in rural United States is really not a farm group at all. It includes all those persons who live in rural areas but who work somewhere else. These are people who are attracted to a rural residence because of certain strong values they hold relating to life outside the city or because of certain conveniences rural residence has for them. It is for this reason they are sometimes called "residential" agriculturists. Many of this group live in the so-called urban fringes and have interests which run to lawn grasses, ornamental shrubs, pets, and vegetable gardens. To this extent they may be said to be avocational agriculturists. Students of rural life feel that residential agriculturists will become an increasingly potent force for change as they reflect city ways more than rural ways in their life activities.

The Emerging Rural Community: Today, examples of rural neighborhoods and communities as traditionally known are increasingly difficult to find. In some places these types of groups have simply passed out of the picture as a consequence of population declines. Generally, however, they appear to have given away to a new type of community identified as a trade-center community. This new look in rural communities can be seen almost everywhere. It apparently is a function of good roads and of increasing need for goods and services outside local areas. In the trade center community, income and way of life are not tied immutably to the soil. There is also less interaction at the neighborhood level and more contacts outside one's immediate locality. Some other characteristics of this new type community are: (1) greater interdependence on other communities in the sense of the need for specialized services, (2) a larger number of special interest groups, as ruralites follow urban patterns in supporting all sorts of civic, social and professional organizations, (3) an increasing centralization of social institutions, with churches, schools, etc. moving to a central community location, (4) improved facilities for health, safety, and welfare, but an increasing tax burden to support these services, (5) residents becoming more urban-like in the types of homes built and in their way of living generally, (6) patterns of social stratification changing to adjust to new status positions. (It is interesting to note that some rural persons now attach prestige to certain leisure activities, such as Florida vacations.)

The Emerging Rural Personality: The last panorama of change is seen in the changing rural personality. Traditionally, rural personality traits have included such characteristics as independence; self-reliance; the belief that nature was something to be enjoyed and appreciated, as well as controlled; conservatism; the avoidance of debt; a high regard for hospitality, friendliness and leisure; the conviction that schooling was secondary to family training and work, and a strong fundamentalist religious orientation. Today's average rural personality tends to stand in sharp contrast. There is a strong motivation to gain economic and social position, time is primarily for business and secondarily for neighboring, credit is used where it may help operations, children are sent to school to enhance income and position, leisure time is likely to be spent away from home, religious practices and beliefs are more sophisticated, and in general all contacts are less personal and intimate.

If the changes listed above had to be summarized it could be said that the emergent rural personality expresses less individualism and less personal freedom at the same time that it reflects increasing sophistication about matters outside the rural environment.

Concluding Statement

In conclusion, our studies of American rural life clearly indicate that patterns of social organization are moving from a predominantly primary group orientation (one characterized by intimate face to face association) to a secondary group orientation (one based on special interests of one kind or another). As this takes place, rural value orientation will change with more interest being taken in education, both as a means of acquiring useful skills and knowledge and as a means for obtaining a greater appreciation of the outside world. Our rural schools will have to properly satisfy this growing educational demand if they are not only to survive but contribute to the progress of our nation. This is your challenge. From my acquaintance with rural educators, I have a deep conviction that you will meet it.